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## **‘A victim, and that’s all’: the construction of Meredith Kercher in the British national newspapers**

**Atalanta Goulandris** ([Atalanta.Goulandris.2@city.ac.uk](mailto:Atalanta.Goulandris.2@city.ac.uk))

**and Eugene McLaughlin** ([e.mclaughlin@city.ac.uk](mailto:e.mclaughlin@city.ac.uk))

City, University of London Department of Sociology Rhind Building, Room D617  
Northampton Square London EC1V 0HB

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### **Abstract**

What journalistic techniques are employed to construct a newsworthy female murder victim in the age of social media? Focusing on Meredith Kercher’s murder, this article examines how Kercher’s victim persona was fashioned by the British national press before the arrests of Amanda Knox and two others. Contrary to prevailing perspectives, we argue that the newsworthy murder victim is not necessarily an ideal victim. Murder victim status in a news story is a multi-faceted construction, contingent on whatever will magnify newsworthiness. The Kercher case is the first example of British journalists using the murder victim’s Facebook content as the primary news resource, adding “authenticity” to the text and images used, since it originated from the victim herself. The research findings illustrate how Kercher was sexualized through the application of

misogynist victim-blaming templates used in the reporting of sex crimes. It was the degradation of her ideal victim status that drove the initial newsworthiness of the murder story.

KEYWORDS: Facebook, ideal victim, Meredith Kercher, status degradation, victim blaming

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how the news media's construction of a female murder victim is a dynamic process, shaped by misogynist reporting templates and driven by the need to attract consumers. We focus on the pre-arrest reporting trajectory of the murder of Meredith Kercher in Perugia, Italy. On 2 November 2007, Kercher, a British Erasmus student, was found dead in her bedroom, having been stabbed brutally in what appeared to have been a sexually motivated murder. Amanda Knox, one of her flatmates and Knox's boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito, were convicted of her murder in December 2009 and spent four years in prison. The case traversed the Italian appeal process, until they were both fully exonerated by the Supreme Court in March 2015. In October 2008, Rudy Guede was sentenced to 30 years imprisonment for Kercher's sexual assault and murder in a separate fast-track trial. This was later reduced to 16 years on appeal. There was very little media interest in Guede at any stage, despite the fact that there was clear forensic evidence implicating him. After her arrest on 6 November, the global media's gaze locked onto Amanda Knox and the media hysteria about 'Foxy Knoxy', the 'sex crazed' killer, has been subject to much scrutiny

(Candace Dempsey 2010; Barbie Nadeau 2010; John Follain 2011; Amanda Knox 2013; Stevie Simkin 2013; Lieve Gies and Maria Bortoluzzi 2016). Yet there is no research on the pre-arrest reporting of Kercher's murder, before any suspects were in the frame.

This study expands on existing research in four ways. First, it challenges the assumption that it is the accentuation of victims' innocence status that makes them newsworthy (Steven Chermak 1995; Ann Gekoski, Jacqueline Gray and Joanna Alder 2012; Lucia Lykke 2015). Although Kercher fulfilled the criteria for 'ideal victim' status, we argue that it was the degradation of her victim status that gave this murder story momentum. An irresistible cocktail of a 'slasher' murder, illicit assignations, alleged sex games and a cast of suspects in Halloween costume amplified newsworthiness and contributed to Kercher's downward shift in the hierarchy of innocence. Second, we clarify that the 'ideal victim' and the 'newsworthy victim' are conceptually distinct and these classifications are motivated by different dynamics. Third, we highlight the central role that visuals play in the reporting of female murder victims, evidencing the growing reliance on social media as the primary source of such visuals. Finally, this article illustrates the precarious nature of victim status in sexually motivated murders. During the initial reporting, Kercher endured a four-day status degradation process across the British national press. A disturbing misogynist reporting template was used to produce a bifurcated representation of a studious, sociable young woman and a sexualised, promiscuous party girl, who was partly responsible for her death. This representation only ceased when Kercher was declared to be 'morally innocent' at a police news conference on 6 November 2007. Her newly established ideal victim status was,

however, wholly overshadowed by the media frenzy surrounding Amanda Knox.

Thereafter, Kercher became something of a 'forgotten' victim, her ideal status only relevant insofar as it served the good/evil binary news reporting of the murder trial, contrasting with and thus reinforcing the media's fabrication of 'Foxy Knoxy'.

### **The news media and murder victims: a complex relationship**

This article utilises the findings of four bodies of literature: that which theorises the concept of the ideal victim, that which explores the characterisation of a newsworthy murder victim, that which analyses the photogenic victim and feminist scholarship on female victims of sexual violence. First, it is necessary to distinguish between conceptualisations of ideal and newsworthy victims, which are often conflated within the existing research. Nils Christie's (1986) enunciation of the ideal victim serves as a typological tool, used to highlight a hierarchy of victims. Christie's ideal victim is someone who can claim legitimate victim status without being contradicted or silenced by a more powerful other. Christie asserts, for example, that only a young virgin walking home from visiting a sick relative, who resists being raped by a monstrous stranger, will be recognized as an ideal rape victim. This ideal abstraction signals that there are some individuals who are deemed to be more deserving of victim status than others - individuals who can in no way be held responsible for their victimisation. Journalists also utilise victim stereotypes, with the newsworthy victim resembling Christie's ideal victim - recognisably innocent, very old or very young, attractive, white and female (Steve Chermak 1995; Susan Moeller 2002; Chris Greer 2017). Both approaches

encourage binary, highly moralised representations of victims of sex crimes. Applying rape myths and whore/virgin dichotomies, a female victim can only be wholly innocent, and thus blameless, if she does not fall within patriarchal notions of culpability.

However, our findings suggest that ideal and newsworthy victims are quite distinct categories, sometimes overlapping, sometimes not. The newsworthy murder victim is primarily a marketable news commodity, and may or may not be ideal. Both kinds of victim are constructions and their status is not fixed, nor certain and 'dependent upon such things as credibility, influence, and warrant for honoring one set of claims over another' (James Holstein and Gale Miller 1990, 114; Paul Rock 2002).

Well-established news values continue to play an important role in the choice of which murders to prioritise. Whilst research shows that the age, race, class, gender and sexuality of a murder victim play a critical role in story selection and coverage (Chermak 1995; Diane Richardson and Hazel May 1999; Cheryl Neely 2015), a newsworthy murder victim must also be commercially exploitable. News organisations can only exploit murders if there is autobiographical information with which to create a compelling victim persona that can engage news consumers emotionally (Neil Websdale and Alexander Alvarez 1998). Photographs provide candid immediacy, yet remarkably little research exists on the visual construction of crime news stories. A murder victim's attractiveness is a primary news value, playing a critical role in story selection (Stuart Hall 1981; Chermak 1995; Gekoski et al 2012; Phil Jones and Claire Wardle 2008). The time-honored visual representation of a murder victim has been in the form of personal photographs released by the family, routinely co-joined with images of crime scenes,

suspects and witnesses. The news value of such co-joined images is highly variable and depends on both the nature of the murder and the eye-catching qualities of the victim (Will Straw 2015). Images of high profile murder victims can of course become iconic.

The advent of social media has generated a quantum leap in the ability of journalists to identify and develop a newsworthy murder victim persona. Immediate access to digital lives, enables journalists to harvest intimate information, especially life-logging visuals (selfies and posies) (Monica Anderson and Andrea Caumont 2014). The motivation behind and process of fabricating a digital self is linked to complex (mis)perceptions of self-expression and a preferred public persona. On-line visual sharing can thus serve a multitude of contradictory communicative and performative functions, particularly for young women (Kathrynn Pounders, Christine M Kowalczyk and Kirsten Stowers 2016). However, like the many interpretations of a news photograph, the meaning of online images can also be manipulated by the interplay between the image and accompanying text, as well as how it is framed and where it is published. Thus, online images can be reworked by news organisations to the point where a new meaning emerges to powerful effect, even if such signification is at odds with the image's 'original' face value and textual framing (Stuart Hall 1981).

The Kercher case is the first example we can find of British journalists using material sourced from social network sites, to generate a newsworthy murder victim.. In an unsolved murder, the news media's attention normally centres on the hunt for the killer, not the victim (Keith Soothill and Sylvia Walby 1991; Kate Clark 1992). The scrutiny



of and speculation about Kercher over the first four days was, therefore, unusual and largely facilitated by journalists' use of her unsecured Facebook account. Before social media sites facilitated such access, such concentrated visualisation was rare and only possible if the victim was already in the public eye. The case of Sally Anne Bowman, a model and victim of a high profile sexually motivated murder in London in 2005, exemplifies this.

Female victims of sex crimes are among the most denigrated of victims (Soothill and Walby 1991; Helen Benedict 1992; Sue Lees 1997; Nancy Worthington 2008; Sarah Zydervelt, Rachel Zajac, Andy Kaladelfos and Nina Westara 2016). Through culturally potent rape myths (Martha Burt 1980) and status degradation techniques (Harold Garfinkel 1956), victims find themselves accused of precipitating or contributing to their victimisation, by being 'eminently rapeable' (Clark 1992: 221; Paul Mason and Jane Monckton-Smith 2008). Typically, news reporting polarises female victims, reproducing stereotypical notions of normative femininity and rape myths. Journalists do this through choice of vocabulary, story frames and what they include or leave out (Benedict 1992). Female victims who partake in 'questionable activities, or (are) involved in work or exhibiting behaviour outside the traditional role of women' will be blamed for their victimisation (Marian Meyers 1997, 61-62; Lees 1997; Shannon O'Hara 2012).

Benedict (1992) analysed the news reporting trajectory of the 1986 murder of Jennifer Levin in New York. Levin and Robert Chambers, the accused, were white, photogenic, wealthy Manhattan 'preppies' and instantly newsworthy. The competitive logics of New

York newspapers resulted in a cynical disregard for accuracy and decency. Within four days of her murder, Levin's character was destroyed by the dynamics of misogynist 'hack pack' journalism. Written by 66 men and 21 female journalists, the press' focus quickly switched from the accused to the alleged actions of the murdered young woman, with Levin being smeared by Chambers' legal team, using the customary template of the promiscuous wild party girl, who was accidentally strangled during 'rough sex gone wrong.' Reporters embellished this re-characterisation of a young woman who had 'courted death' (Benedict 1992 157, 161). Over 30 years later, the Kercher reporting goes further, whereby victim status degradation occurs even without defence lawyers' input, taking place before any arrest or anything concrete about the murder is even known.

## **Data and methods**

Our empirical analysis focuses on the journalistic techniques that were used to transform Kercher into a newsworthy murder victim. We chose to concentrate on British national printed press coverage because our examination of mainstream British broadcast news established, that until the arrest of Amanda Knox, this was a murder story driven by the newspapers. We researched the newspaper coverage in several ways. A thematic qualitative analysis of hard copy of all of the national press coverage between 2 and 6 November 2007 was undertaken, producing 45 newspaper articles, comprising just over 21,000 words and 105 photographs. Hard copy was favoured over

online copy, which was, at the time, still relatively under-developed. A selection of journalistic and other accounts of the murder case were also used to contextualize our analysis (Channel 4 2008; Dempsey 2010; Nadeau 2010; Follain 2011; Knox 2013; BBC 2014; Netflix 2016)

We focused on three key aspects of the reporting: the descriptive features, the characterisations and the visualisation of both the murder and the victim. Based on the coding criteria of previous studies, we assessed the position/prominence of the story in each newspaper and within a particular page, the journalists, sources, text, headlines, images and captions. Our textual analysis concentrated on the framing of the murder, language, tone, and factual and implicit narrative content, including innuendo and speculation. Additionally, and critically, in line with Benedict (1992), we also worked across the four days of newspaper coverage to identify the reporting trajectory of the story and to see how news stories were developed by the self-exciting dynamics of 'hack pack' journalism. Checking whether key storylines, angles, hooks and images were reworked across newspapers, enabled us to identify whether journalists were using the same sources and if they relied, knowingly or not, on the same stereotypical reporting templates, to create a newsworthy victim persona (Jenny Kitzinger 2000).

Our visual research identified the number of images used by each newspaper, their size, position and how they related to other photographs and text, what they depicted, taking into account the headlines, captions and text of the whole news story. Particular attention was paid to identifying the photograph's source, so as to consider the

mediated credibility and authenticity it might convey.

### **Reporting Context**

News of a violent murder over the Halloween holiday period was picked up by Perugia's main radio station within an hour of the discovery of Kercher's body and local journalists were at the crime scene almost immediately (Nina Burleigh 2011; Dempsey 2010; Nadeau 2010). By the end of the following day, a substantial press pack had assembled, with Italian television trucks lined up in the centre of the small city (Burleigh 2011; Paul Russell and Graham Johnson 2010). Press photographers and camera crews found the perfect observation point in a public car park, enabling them to zoom into a murder scene, which the police had failed to screen off.

From the outset the British news media invested resources in this murder. Within 24 hours almost every national paper, as well as the BBC and Sky News, had journalists in Perugia. Nick Pisa, the British journalist most notoriously associated with the sensational tabloid reporting of the case, explained its newsworthiness thus:

'A murder always gets people going: bit of intrigue, bit of a mystery, a whodunit. And we have this beautiful picturesque hilltop town in the middle of Italy. It was a particularly gruesome murder: throat slit, semi-naked, blood everywhere. I mean what more do you want in a story? (Laughing) All that's missing is the Royal Family and the Pope!' (Netflix 2016)

During the first four days of reporting, before any arrests or developments in the

investigation, 34 British print journalists had covered the story, 10 of whom were in situ. Like the Jennifer Levin case, they were mainly men - 26 male reporters and 8 women. With no concrete developments to report in the hunt for the killer, British journalists nonetheless lingered, frantically reworking the scant details of the brutal murder by a mystery assailant and interrogating the biographical (real or imagined) characteristics of the photogenic, middle-class female victim. There was no official police-press or police-family liaison, no official police statement and no police press conference during this period. Journalists' speculation about the circumstances of Kercher's death was enabled by a frenzied Italian news media and an under-pressure police force and prosecutor's office, which were unofficially leaking all possible scenarios to them. But it was their access to her unsecured Facebook page that provided them with news gold, in the form of personal information and multiple photographs. Journalists were able to source data on who Kercher was, who her friends were and what she had been doing. They were able to lift photographic evidence of much of this. This is the first time, in a high profile murder story, that British journalists used a victim's own social media persona as a primary news source, attaching increased veracity and credibility to the signification of the material used, since it originated from the ultimate 'source', the victim herself. This gave news consumers a much richer characterisation of Kercher, which, constructed from images and text blended together to powerful effect, irrespective of its accuracy.

**Findings: the degradation of Meredith Kercher's ideal victim status**

## Day 1

All the national newspapers covered the murder. The *Daily Mail*, *Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* ran it on their front page. Inside coverage consisted of full-page stories in the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Star*, *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, quarter page in the *Guardian* and *Daily Express* and only a small column in the *Independent*. Material was sourced from police and coroner leaks, the British Embassy and British Council, two universities and the Italian news media. Kercher's and her friends' unsecured Facebook accounts gave journalists access to a photographic diary of her social life in Perugia and equally importantly the online tributes that were flowing in. Eight different photographs of the victim were used across the press on this first day, all lifted from Facebook, with only the *Guardian* and *Independent* using one apiece. The *Daily Express* used two, the *Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* displayed three each and the *Sun* four. This in-depth newspaper visualisation of a victim was unprecedented and made possible because of access to the relatively new social media sites, before users were savvy enough to use privacy settings.

Meredith's newsworthiness should have resided in the fact that she was the quintessential ideal victim. A middle-class, attractive young woman, she attended a private girls' school and was brought up in a prosperous London suburb. The 21 year-old university exchange student had been in Perugia for less than three months. She was expected home in Surrey the following week for her mother's birthday and had promised to bring presents from Perugia's famous chocolate fair. Her father said his

perfect daughter was 'so beautiful, so witty', whilst friends described her as 'tranquil', 'quiet' and 'studious' (The *Daily Mail*, p.11; *Daily Star*, p.19; *Sun*, p.7; *Daily Telegraph*, p.5 and *Daily Mirror*, p.6). However, this 'good family girl' characterisation of Kercher was overshadowed by the main thrust of the day's reporting, which immediately framed it as a violent sex crime.

Adopting a Halloween 'slasher' movie frame, the reporting both fetishised and sexualised Kercher's bloodied corpse and characterised her as a sexy, party girl whilst alive. Journalists exploited these dual characterisations to maximum effect. Key to these narratives was the unofficial police leak that Kercher had been found 'semi naked'. The *Times*, *Independent*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Star* and *Sun* all highlight this in their opening sentences, the *Times* putting it in its sub-heading. Kercher was 'semi naked', 'half naked', 'in a state of undress' or 'partially clothed'. The *Daily Star* provided a description of her 'semi-naked' and 'butchered in her own bed' that was suggestive of the Jack the Ripper murders (p.19). However, the impact of this narrative was brought alive by the use of Facebook photographs of the victim and her party friends to illustrate the story. A combination of vampire outfits, costume 'fangs', fake blood and masks were the stylised, artificial horror of Halloween, which was mirrored by the actual horror of Kercher's murder, reported in the text. Six newspapers used a headshot of Kercher dressed in a Dracula-style cape with a stand-up, spiky collar and fake blood on her mouth. The *Times*, *Daily Mail* and *Sun* also included a shot of Kercher at the Halloween party with someone wearing a *Scream* mask. There were three further Halloween themed pictures of Kercher that day. Seven of the newspapers highlighted

that Kercher's throat had been cut, in the headline, as well as in the text. The *Daily Express* mentions it three times. Four newspapers include pictures of the house in which her body was found: the 'Horror House' (*Daily Express*, p.25) or 'Grim Scene' (*Daily Mirror*, p.5) or 'Horror Scene' (*Sun*, p.6) 'Murder Scene' (*Daily Star*, p.10). All the newspapers, save for the *Times*, reinforce that image with details of a blood-splattered crime scene. Kercher was found 'in a pool of blood' (*Daily Mail*, *Sun*) or 'under a blood soaked mattress' (*Daily Express*). Five newspapers note the 'blood soaked' or 'blood stained' pieces of paper found around the body, three that there was blood on the window frame, two in the bathroom and trail of blood on the floor and two that a bloody tissue had been found in the garden.

Running alongside and interwoven with these accounts, journalists did their utmost to sexualise Kercher as a party girl whilst she was alive. Three of the newspapers (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Sun*) include a photograph, taken from her Facebook account, of her in a skimpy, strappy dress, standing side on to the camera, smiling and revealing a bare shoulder and arm. For the *Sun* and *Daily Mirror* this is the largest, most prominent visual of the story. The *Daily Telegraph* has a different, smaller picture of Kercher wearing a tank-top, with her arm raised as she smiles to camera, once again revealing an exposed armpit, arm and shoulder blade region. The sheer number of Facebook photographs of Kercher, partying in Perugia, overwhelm assertions that she was a studious girl. She is 'Fun party girl, Meredith' (*Sun*, p.7) or 'Hallowe'en party Briton' (*Daily Telegraph*, p.5) or '...found dead after party in Italy' (*Daily Mail*, p.1) even though she had not been to a party the night before she was killed. The 'brown eyed brunette' features in Facebook



photographs, which show 'the smiling student in high spirits posing with friends, including several young men' (*Daily Mail*, p.1) and captions the photograph of her, side on, with her bare arm in a tight dress, 'Bubbly: But Meredith was devoted to studies'. Given that all the *Daily Mail's* images are of Kercher at parties, is the assertion of studiousness really plausible? The *Daily Mail* and *Times* further include a headshot photograph of Kercher, flanked by two men, one of whom has his arm and hand hooked around her neck as they smile to camera. The *Daily Mail* caption reads: 'Centre of attention: Meredith with friends at the earlier fancy dress party', implying at the centre of all male attention.

### **Days 2 and 3**

In Sunday and Monday's coverage, journalists across broadsheets and tabloids layered and developed the previous day's characterisation of Kercher. Based on a leaked autopsy report that found signs of 'sexual activity', but no evidence of rape, journalists jumped to the (erroneous) conclusion that Kercher had had consensual sex before she was murdered. Kercher's characterisation swiftly evolved from a sexy, fun-loving party girl to a thrill-seeking, careless, sexually active one who was part of Perugia's seedy night sub-culture. Like Jennifer Levin, Kercher had courted death.

The *Mail on Sunday*, *Sunday Express*, *News of the World* and *Sunday Mirror* included illustrated double-page specials on the murder and it was allocated half to three quarter pages by the broadsheets. Journalists continued to cannibalise her Facebook account, enabling them to access the foreign student bar and club culture of Perugia and

interview an assortment of owners, bar workers and fellow students. The *Mail on Sunday* used two new Facebook pictures of Kercher, both of which fitted with her evolving characterisation. The main, centrally placed photograph, shows her leaning close into the camera, pouting suggestively. The smaller one immediately below, taken by an ex-boyfriend, is of her lying on a bed, wearing T shirt and jeans, shot from a low angle with her buttocks and legs occupying the entire left hand part of the photograph. *The Daily Star Sunday's* (p.2) picture of Kercher, dominating the half-page story, reveals her wearing a strapless top, one bare arm raised behind her head in seductive mode. By Monday, because access to Kercher's Facebook page had now been blocked, probably by her family who later turned it into a memorial site, newspapers were obliged to re-use photographs. The *Daily Express* (p.11) published the only new photograph of her, highlighting her sexuality. Dominating the page, the large image shows Kercher in a sleeveless, low-cut, cleavage-revealing dress and smiling to camera.

Visually, the Sunday tabloids highlighted the savage attack that Kercher had endured in a blood-drenched bedroom. Instead of the imitation horror in the Halloween party photographs used the day before, three of the newspapers focused on the real violence of the murder. The *News of the World*, *Sunday Mirror* and *Sunday Express* each published a close-up of a bloody handprint on Kercher's bedroom: 'HAND OF A KILLER' proclaimed the *News of the World* headline, but included the macabre speculation that this could also have been made by Kercher as she was being attacked. The same three tabloids featured grim photographs of a body bag being carried out of the property. The graphic nature of her death is portrayed in nearly all the forensic descriptions of the

crime scene: 'There were pools of blood' from 'this butchery in the bedroom' (*Sunday Times*, p.9), 'blood everywhere' (*News of the World*, p.9) in her 'blood-spattered bedroom' (*Sunday Mirror*, p.10). The *Sunday Mirror* reports its exclusive interview with Raffaele Sollecito, under the dramatic headline: 'I found her body, there was blood all over...it was horrific' (p.11). The *Sunday Times* and *Observer* both gave gory details of how Kercher died: 'The only injury was to the throat. The wound was a single cut from the bottom towards the top, cutting through the carotid artery' (*Times*, p.9) and 'her throat cut by a sharp object or knife thrust just once in an upward motion with great force' (*Observer*, p.7). The coverage continued to sexualise her corpse. All but the *Sunday Telegraph* reminded the reader that Kercher was discovered 'semi-naked', but some added titillating detail:

'Her blouse had been lifted, exposing her breasts, and her slacks were unbuttoned' (*Independent*, p.12)

'Her T-shirt was pulled up over her breasts and she was naked' (*Sunday Mirror*, p.11)

'Police found Meredith on her bed covered by a duvet and wearing only a T-shirt' (*Observer*, p.7)

'...ripped bra on the floor of her bedroom' (*Mail on Sunday*, p.18)

Monday's coverage continued in the same vein. Save the *Daily Mirror*, all repeated that Kercher had been found 'semi-naked', with her throat slashed. The *Sun* (p.15) and *Daily Express* (p.11) reminded readers that Kercher was naked aside from a top, which had

been pushed up above her breasts. All also continued to conjure the horrific bloody nature of the murder. The *Daily Mail* (p.5) and *Guardian* (p.11) published a large photograph of the blood smear on the wall in her bedroom. The cumulative effect was to reinforce the sexualisation of Kercher and highlight the horrific bloodiness of her murder to thrill readers further.

This dual sexualisation of Kercher, both in death and in life, utilised a well-honed rape-myth reporting template, where female victims of sex crimes become victims of rape-myth reporting, which overtly or implicitly blames female victims of sex crimes for their victimisation (Benedict 1992). Does this make sense ? Reporters now speculated as to what kind of girl Kercher was, highlighting her casual relationships. The *Sunday Times* referred to an 'occasional boyfriend' (p.9), the *Mail on Sunday* cited the owner of a bar, which Kercher frequented, saying that she had no regular boyfriend, but 'may have had the occasional romance' (p.18). The *Sunday Express* claimed that she was 'having a relationship with an unnamed Italian man' (p.4), whilst at the same time reporting that the police were looking for an Eastern European or a local chef from Morocco or Tunisia who may have been her sexual partner and/or killer. Four newspapers (*Sunday Times*, *Sunday Mirror*, *Sunday Telegraph* and *Mail on Sunday*) stated that the police had not ruled out the possibility that the killer was a woman well known to the victim, further re-casting Kercher as sexually permissive, suggesting she might have been murdered by a lesbian lover. By Monday the police speculated and journalists reported that she had consensual sex with someone whom she had secretly arranged to meet on the night she was murdered.

The *Daily Mail* (p.5) and *Daily Express* (p.11) continued to focus on 'what kind of girl Kercher was' and her prior sexual experiences. Both cited Pasquale Pisco, the bar owner, who reinforced the idea that Kercher was no stranger to casual encounters: '(the police) wanted to know what sort of person Meredith was...They asked if I knew of any boyfriends and I said she'd had a couple of flirts but no serious relationship'. The *Guardian* (p.11) achieved the same result by reporting the innuendo in the form of a denial. One of Kercher's friends 'joined other acquaintances yesterday in dismissing suggestions that she was murdered during a tryst with a man she met at a party. "She was not the type to invite someone home without knowing them very well". The newspapers had an assortment of possible murder scenarios, however inconsistent and fanciful, to work with: Kercher met her killer at a masked Halloween party, made a secret date to meet and let him into the house; could have been followed home by a stalker; perhaps disturbed a burglar; was killed by a migrant or a crazed drug dealer who hung around the basketball courts near her house or by a woman, all of whom she had arranged to meet.

Journalists developed the suggestion that her secret sexual assignation/tryst played a causal role in her murder. This was a young woman who had left a trail of casual encounters across Perugia's bar and club scene. Kercher's party girl status was confirmed in interviews: a previous boyfriend told the *Mail on Sunday* (p.19) 'She loved to have a drink and to party' and she went the local bar, Merlin's 'all the time'. Another bar owner told the *Sunday Telegraph* (p.9) that 'Meredith was a regular in the bar'. She was a 'girl who would never turn down an invitation to party in the evenings' (*Mail on*

*Sunday*, p.18). The picturesque, medieval university town of the first day's reporting was now transformed into one plagued by a hedonistic student party culture, awash with drugs. Critically, Kercher was not careful enough, ignoring the warnings she was given about Perugia (*Sunday Telegraph*, *Mail on Sunday*, *Sunday Mirror*, *Sunday Express*). The *Observer* included a cautionary sermon about the risks faced by young middle-class women studying abroad. Such students were naïve and vulnerable, prone to making what turn out to be harmful decisions because of cultural and language differences. Further, their flatmates, of mixed nationalities, will not necessarily look out for them and 'signals can be misread', whilst students 'fumble their way' through misunderstandings and mutual incomprehension (*Observer*, p.7).

Perhaps the most revealing indication of how female murder victims are constructed is captured in the comments made by those interviewed: Kercher's aunt is quoted in the *Sunday Express* (p.4) and *News of the World* (p.9): 'She did not deserve this. She was a quiet, shy person who despite the pictures was reserved and loved life'. The implication is that had Kercher been an outgoing party girl, as suggested by the pictures, but denied by her aunt, then perhaps she might have deserved to have been murdered. Rape myths and attendant blaming are absorbed and accepted as normal in narratives, beyond newspaper reporting. Many implicitly agreed that she had 'courted death'. A fellow student told the *Sunday Telegraph* (p.9):

'I know Meredith met someone on Halloween...we think it was him that persuaded her to open the door...I warned her about this. I warned her a thousand times. Girls should

never stay at home alone.'

Not only should Kercher have never have stayed at home alone, she should never have gone home alone, according to a local bar owner: 'We tell girls who are studying in Perugia not to walk home by themselves' (*Observer*, p.7). Whatever her movements, in whatever scenario, Kercher was partly responsible for her death.

#### **Day 4**

The sexualisation of Kercher reached new heights, evidencing an unrestrained hack pack mentality at work. Her family released an official statement as they prepared to travel to Italy to reclaim their daughter's body and a candle-lit vigil was held in Perugia's main square in her memory. Yet neither dominated the news agenda. The emotional 270-word statement was referred to in the *Daily Mail*, *Mirror*, *Express* and *Telegraph* and published in full in the *Sun*, under the title '*Our Mez*'. It reiterated what her family and friends had always said: Kercher was a studious, hard working, generous, caring, witty, fun-loving, beautiful young woman had been looking forward to studying in Italy, to improve her language skills and learn about the culture. Considerate and kind, she was due home that weekend for her mother's birthday. Whilst not specifically addressing the speculative reporting of Kercher's lifestyle of parties and casual sex, the statement clearly sought to salvage her reputation. Given that there were no developments in the case, one might have expected this statement, which conveyed the devastating impact of the murder on her family and/or the vigil to be the main focus of the day's reporting. However, only the *Independent* (p.8) privileged this stance in a short, fifty word piece.

The central hook in the rest of the newspapers was the police's 'new theory', leaked to the media, that two people had killed Kercher. Journalists were drawn to the irresistible non sequitur that she had therefore consented to have sex with both her attackers: STUDENT 'BUTCHERED DURING 3-IN-BED SEX' proclaimed the *Daily Star* headline (p.14), a 'frenzied three-in-a-bed sex session' that 'went horrifically wrong'. A pre-arranged 'sexual encounter turned violent' (*Daily Mail* p.7; *Sun*, p.19) and 'went tragically wrong' (*Daily Mirror*, p.15). The tabloids claimed that a forensic team was now examining the bodily fluids found inside Kercher to see if they belonged to more than one man, without considering the intrusive and sordid nature of this detail. Combining the information from the pathologist that there was evidence of sexual activity and the police theory that Kercher had been killed by two people, Kercher was now constructed in all the newspapers, save for the *Independent* and *Guardian*, as a promiscuous party girl who picked up two strangers and invited them home for group sex. Not just strangers, but most likely migrant strangers as police were reportedly seeking to interview a North African man (*Daily Mirror*, p.15; *Sun*, p.19; *Daily Mail*, p.7, *Daily Express*, p.26; *Times*, p.21). Kercher now entered taboo territory for engaging in cross-racial sexual liaisons, a somewhat ironic condemnation given that she was herself of mixed race, though no journalist had mentioned it.

Reporters for the broadsheets were more implicit in her sexually deviant characterisation, using different techniques to consolidate this frame, often introducing a damning rumour so as to be able to deny it: 'Suggestions that Ms Kercher took part in the drugs sub-culture of the city are largely discounted' asserted the *Times* (p.21).



Suggestions made by whom? No sources are cited. Moreover, they are only 'largely', not completely discounted. The innuendo, that Kercher may have been involved in the drugs sub-culture, is left suspended, unresolved, yet there. The *Daily Telegraph* and the *Guardian*, whilst purporting to deny speculative rumours, nonetheless reported them. The *Daily Telegraph* (p.3) could not resist the headline "Meredith 'killed by two men' after sex", even though the journalist was more circumspect in the main text. The *Guardian's* headline ran with this dismissal: 'Student's father rejects police murder theory', with the smaller sub-heading: 'Media urged to avoid unpleasant speculation' (p.13). Her father stated that 'Meredith was just not that sort of person. She would never have got involved in anything like that.' (*Daily Telegraph*, p.3; *Daily Express*, p.20, *Daily Mail*, p.7, *Daily Mirror*, p.15, *Guardian*, p.15) but this brief protestation is somewhat lost in sensational allegations of a group sex game gone wrong. The *Guardian* managed to get the best of both worlds. It reported the police theory of 'late night tryst', Meredith having sex with her killer(s) whilst at the same time acknowledging that the investigating magistrate was alarmed by the nature of media reporting. He sought '...the maximum reserve and asked journalists to avoid unpleasant and useless speculation or feverish hysteria' (p.13). The *Guardian* was the only newspaper to report the authorities' concerns about media portrayals of Kercher.

### **Turning Point: from degraded newsworthy victim to ideal, but forgotten victim**

The degradation of Kercher's victim status only ceased with the arrests of Knox, Sollecito

and Patrice Lumumba. At a packed, choreographed news conference on the morning of 6 November 2007, Perugia's police commissioner announced that the murder had been solved. In the light of earlier reporting, he asserted that 'la giovane Meredith era moralmente integerrima' and 'una vittima e basta', or as the British media translated, Meredith was 'morally innocent' and 'a victim, and that's all'. In line with Christie's victim who puts up a vigorous fight to avoid victimisation, Kercher had behaved in a blameless manner and was killed because she had physically resisted her friends' efforts to force her to take part in a drug-fuelled group sex game. From that point on, she was reconstituted as an innocent ideal victim. As we have demonstrated elsewhere (Goulandris and McLaughlin 2016), journalists instantly refashioned their misogynist reporting templates to place 'Foxy Knoxy', not 'Our Mez', at the centre of the story. The sexualized, frenzied and speculative reporting was instantly displaced to Knox. Kercher's ideal victim status remained important as a journalistic technique to counterbalance and heighten Knox's monstrousness (Holohan, 2016) but thereafter, she herself was no longer newsworthy. 'Foxy Knoxy' went on to become a mesmerizing, global news sensation that would far outlast the life of the case, final acquittal and total exoneration of Knox, leaving Kercher all but forgotten.

## **Conclusion**

In the race for newsworthy content, the ability of journalists to exploit certain categories of female murder victims is enhanced by being able to harvest valuable

personal materials stored in social media accounts. Our findings highlight that, although there were predictable variations in layout, narrative and visual content, style and tone across British national newspapers, there was no sharp ‘tabloid vs broadsheet’ differentiation in the Kercher’s characterisation. Quite the contrary, analysis of the reporting trajectory reveals that none shied away from reproducing similar, grisly, forensic-style accounts of the bloody crime scene. None resisted the choice to describe, and report repeatedly, how her mutilated bloodied body had been found ‘semi-naked’ and that there had been ‘sexual activity’. Even when framed as denials, all, save the *Independent*, reported the speculative theory that Kercher had died in a group ‘sex game gone wrong’. These reporters and editors fashioned the same source material in strikingly similar ways, utilising archetypal misogynist templates. The self-exciting hack-pack dynamics that generated a sensational, sexualised murder news story resulted in journalists losing all sense of perspective, adopting lax notions of truth and a disregard for the dignity of the victim and the trauma endured by her family and friends. For at least one journalist, reporting on this murder case turned out to be the springboard to international infamy.

This case demonstrates the need for scholars to distinguish analytically between the ideal and the newsworthy murder victim. Family, friends, fellow students and university teachers bore witness to Kercher’s unequivocally ideal victim status. This designation should have been reinforced by the manner of her horrific ordeal: brutally murdered in her bedroom by an unknown killer. Yet, this characterisation failed to capture the news agenda and John Kercher’s attempts to wrestle back his daughter’s reputation were not

forceful enough to corroborate her status as an ideal victim. Moreover, once Kercher's ideal victim status was officially confirmed by the Italian police, she was no longer of any real interest to journalists. However, the initial characterization remained embedded in the subsequent reporting of the murder trials.

Our findings also provide empirical insight into the range of journalistic techniques used to transform Kercher into a compellingly marketable, newsworthy commodity. Victim characterisation is contingent on the availability of biographical information, especially visuals and on finding fresh angles and hooks to maintain news consumers' interest. Initially, newspapers amplified the Halloween slasher-movie features of Kercher's murder. These were thoroughly exploited through the sexualisation of her death and life in Perugia. Over four days of the reporting trajectory, it was the degradation of Kercher's character that propelled the story on, when there were no concrete developments in the police investigation. A vivid persona was created through crafting together biographical details, local rumours, lurid conjecture and speculation lifted from Italian news reports, unofficial police theories and a leaked autopsy report. The use of numerous personal photographs gave this persona an indispensable layer of authenticity, precisely because they were sourced from Kercher's Facebook pages and were, thus, a reliable representation of her 'real' self. This case demonstrates that it is the reality-defining power of the fully visualized digital self that determines who is, and who is not, a newsworthy female murder victim.

The uniform characterisation of Kercher as a promiscuous party girl, who had recklessly

disregarded her own safety, not only optimised her newsworthiness but also enabled lurid speculation as to why she was murdered. This raises important ethical issues. The journalistic reach into Kercher's digital lifelog, new at the time of this case, has now become commonplace. Social media sites are routinely accessed to source the visuals and biographical information needed to manufacture and sensationalise stories. It also occurred during the pre-Leveson era of hyper-intrusive journalistic practices, when some newspapers were practising numerous 'dark arts.' If social media privacy settings are not used, news organisations argue that uploaded visuals are a matter of public record. Irrespective of the legality of and the privacy and copyright issues raised by using such images, what are the ethical implications of journalists using a murder victim's digital lifelog for their own ruthlessly commercial ends?

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